

[By Jenna Pizzi](#)

In an effort to reduce the risk of future flood damage, Gov. Peter Shumlin and U.S. Rep. Peter Welch announced Wednesday nearly \$19.8 million in federal, state and local funds to be used for flood hazard mitigation projects statewide.

The 72 projects selected for the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program include primary residences, rental properties and commercial buildings severely damaged during Tropical Storm Irene or in flooding last May.

"This program will allow communities to come together and determine — whether it is a home, business or infrastructure — where we should never rebuild again," Shumlin said.

Other projects that will be funded by this program include public infrastructure requiring upgrades, public education and outreach efforts, and planning work.

Under the program, which is administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the damaged property is bought from its owners for the pre-flood appraised value. FEMA provides 75 percent of the property value and the state, town or homeowner is required to fund the other 25 percent.

The Vermont projects are pending approval from FEMA.

"We are doing everything that we can that the cost is covered by the state and not by hard-pressed communities," Shumlin said.

Welch, who also was in attendance for the announcement, said while it wasn't easy to secure funds for this program, it was necessary in order to help homeowners who lost everything to get

back on their feet.

"We won't be made whole, but it is a start," Welch said.

Once the property is bought, the program requires that no structure can be placed on the land.

While the buyouts are located in 36 towns statewide, the largest concentration of properties were located in Northfield, where officials gathered for the announcement.

Chris Bradley, chairman of the Northfield Select Board, said the buyouts are a vital part of his community moving forward.

"These are huge steps forward," Bradley said. "We are well on our way."

Town officials are considering a 4 acre park in the Water Street area where 11 of the 13 buyout properties are located.

The proposed park was designed by a Norwich University architecture class that includes one flood victim, Caleb Burrington, who was living in a rental property on Water Street when it was flooded during Tropical Storm Irene.

Burrington and other Norwich students played a key role in helping other flood victims muck out in the days following the storm; their dedication to the community continues.

"We are a part of this community as much as everybody else is," Burrington said.

If the park proceeds as proposed, it would provide a community garden, walking trails and a playground.

For homeowners like Bonnie and Michael Pemberton, who lived on Water Street in Northfield, they will use the money from the buyout to find a new home.

"This FEMA thing is huge," Michael Pemberton said. "Without this, we would be sunk."

The Pembertons have been in and out of temporary housing since the August storm and acknowledge that it likely will be a few more months until they receive the buyout funds and can find a new home.

"This is far from over," said Bonnie Pemberton, adding that the couple, who is close to retirement, only had five years left on the mortgage on their home that was flooded and they cannot afford to take out another mortgage. "We are considering cost and taxes, but this town has been extremely important to us."

Other local communities that applied for buyout projects include Barre, Barre Town, Middlesex, Cabot and Bolton.

Local communities that applied for buyout projects include Bethel, Brattleboro, Bridgewater, Chester, Clarendon, Danby, Jamaica, Londonderry, Pittsfield, Readsboro, Rochester, Rockingham, Royalton, Sharon, Stockbridge, Wilmington and Woodstock.

Sue Minter, the state's recovery officer, said the 72 projects announced Wednesday are only the first-round grants. She said her team will consider a second round of applications after the deadline on Friday, and there could be a third round, depending on demand and funding for the program.